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ABSTRACT

This study examined data about student achievement in a democratic or participatory classroom environment. The data set is from a suburban middle school in Washington State. Interviews were held with three teachers who identified themselves as teachers who regularly use democratic classroom meetings to examine classroom rules and classroom learning choices. Student achievement records were examined for some students identified as "discouraged learners," underachievers in the lowest quartile of most graded classroom activities. Findings suggest that teachers can have a more positive influence on student achievement when they allow students to have a voice in classroom decisions, although these results are equivocal and warrant further study. The results from this small data set show promising practices that are worthy of further study in the age of the No Child Left Behind Act. (Contains 23 references.) (SLD)

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Student Achievement in Democratic Classrooms

by

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and

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Vancouver School District

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Introduction:

This study examines data about student achievement in a democratic or participatory classroom environment. The data set is from middle school students attending a suburban middle school located in the southwestern Washington State. For this paper, we shall call the school Picasso Middle School.

Specifically, the question we explore is: Will a democratic classroom environment have a positive effect on student achievement as measured by student grades and achievement test scores?

Background:

Typically, one of the most frequently mentioned problems or issues cited by first year or less experienced teachers concern classroom management (Brophy & Evertson, 1976). The perception many preservice teachers gain from their respective teacher education programs is that the teacher must maintain "control" of the classroom. This perception may be reinforced by the student teaching experience and/or the teacher's own lived experience.

Jones and Jones (2001) propose that a teacher's skills of organizing, managing, and instructing a class had a direct impact on healthy teacher-student relationships and student learning. Within the last ten years research about the positive effects the use of democratic and cognitive classroom management strategies have on classroom climate has begun to emerge in the literature (Noddings, 1992; Kohn, 1996; Nelson, 1996; McEwan, Gathercoal & Nimmo, 1997).

Many new or inexperienced teachers are apprehensive about taking risks especially when such risks involve "classroom control". The first step toward a more

democratic classroom model of operation is the classroom meeting (Nelson, 1996; Gathercoal, 1997; Landau & Gathercoal, 2000).

Successful and effective classroom management practices respond to problems when they occur and to preventing problems before they occur (Emmer, Evertson, Clements & Worsham,1997). A key variable in the prevention of any classroom management problem is the establishment of positive student-teacher and peer relationships in the classroom (Jones & Jones, 2001). Often, once the teacher reaches a mutual understanding with her students and thus gains a greater measure of self-confidence, student-teacher relationships begin to flourish and trust and rapport begin to replace doubt and fear.

The most successful classroom management practices are those that go beyond strict obedience to include student self-understanding and self-control (McCaslin & Good, 1996). Yet, many classroom management and discipline strategies currently used in American schools are based on behavior modification philosophies (Hill, 1990). In such cases, students may feel powerless to control their lives. Such a powerless attitude may make students at-risk for school failure. As Sarason (1990) suggests,

> ...the sense of powerlessness [that students must feel] frequently breeds reduced interest and motivation, at best a kind of passionless conformity and at worst a rejection of learning. When one has no stake in the way things are, when one's need or opinions are provided no forum, when one sees oneself as the object of unilateral actions, it takes no particular wisdom to suggest that one would rather be elsewhere. (p. 83)

In a study of 233 middle school students, Ryan & Patrick (2001) noted that there was a statistically significant correlation between those students who perceived their teacher as being caring and supportive and "students' confidence related to the teacher, self-regulated learning, and disruptive behavior" (p. 454).

Method & Data Sources:

In a time when teachers and administrators face ever increasing demands to increase student achievement and ever greater public scrutiny, few teachers, administrators, or districts grant researchers access to student records. Because, I had such difficulty in gaining access to student records, I have included the three teachers who helped this researcher gain access as contributing authors.

I interviewed three Picasso Middle School classroom teachers who self-identified themselves as teachers who regularly use democratic classroom meetings to examine classroom rules and/or classroom learning choices. To determine if student achievement has improved as measured by student grades and by achievement test scores, the teachers and I then examined a set of selected, representative samples of student achievement records for students whom the teachers classified as "discouraged learners". We are using a definition for a discouraged learner that is informed by the work of Dishion, French and Patterson (1995). Discouraged learners are less likely to feel engaged or affiliated in the school setting. Teachers would classify these students as under-achievers who are in the bottom quartile of most graded class activities. Many discouraged learners also have serious family and socio-emotional problems (Jones & Jones, 2001). For this research, we chose to examine the records of only the most discouraged and under-achieving students in two of the teachers' classrooms. Because this is an exploratory

study, we wanted to determine if democratic classroom practices can have a positive effect on the learning of the most discouraged students. We reasoned that if such practices can have a positive impact on the most discouraged students, such practices can help all students.

Picasso Middle School has a student population of over 1,100 in grades six through grade eight. The students are grouped into smaller units called "houses" and then assigned to teams of teachers who are responsible for teaching the language arts, reading, science, social studies, and math. With a total staff of over 100, a new principal, and 16 new teachers in the last three years, Picasso has undergone a lot of changes. Teaching styles vary among staff. Many of the more senior members of the faculty teach in a largely traditional teacher-centered manner while many of the younger teachers describe themselves as more student-centered.

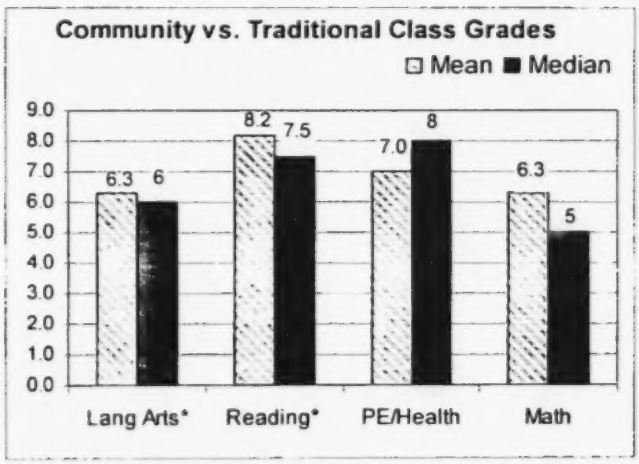
Data Analysis:

The three teachers with whom I collaborated are nearing the end of their third year of teaching. All three expressed optimism about their student classroom contacts since they began including students in the classroom decision-making process. In the words of Mr. D.J. Colter, a sixth grade social studies teacher who allows his students to do projects of their own choosing within the particular subject area of study,

> The point is at that night (parent night), those kids who came were those kids who usually struggle in other subject areas. These were the kids who usually get C's, D's, and F's in other classes and these projects helped bring their grades up because they (the students) get to choose and that's the one area in school that makes them most proud to show their parents. (personal conversation, 2003)

Ms. R. Sisco is sixth grade learning support teacher. We examined the fall semester, 2002 grades of seven of her seventh grade students for the reading and math subject areas that she teaches in relation to one other academic subject, math. We also examined the reading and language grades in relation to another set of subjects in which many non-academic students excel and many students traditionally enjoy: physical education (PE) and health. At the direction of the researcher, Ms. Sisco chose those students whom she would classify as discouraged learners. Ms. Sisco was conducting regular classroom meetings with her classes during fall semester so we examined the fall semester grades for four females and three males who remained in her class throughout the semester.

Because a teacher at Picasso may issue a plus (+) or minus (-) to each letter grade, we used a twelve point system to determine the average and median grades for all seven students. Please refer to Chart #1 below.

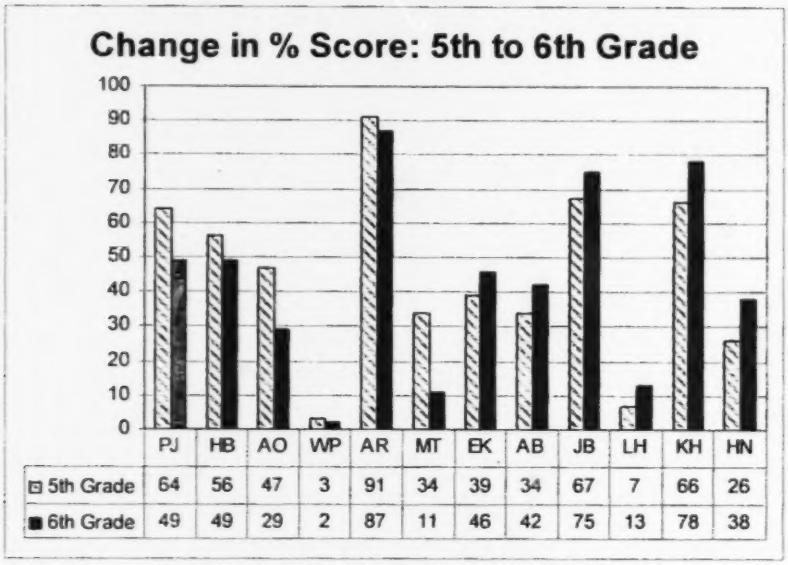


Using a twelve point grading scale, a 5 would be a grade of "C", a 6 would be a "C+", a seven would be a "B-" and an 8 would be a grade of "B". Both the median and mean grades are within a range of agreement. Ms. Sisco teaches the language arts and

reading courses using democratic classroom meetings while the teachers in the particular health, PE, and math classes teach in a more traditional manner. The asterisks following "Lang Arts" and "Reading" on the chart indicate that classroom meetings were held on a regular basis for those two classes. There is a dramatic difference between the grades for the reading and the grades for math. Part of this difference may be explained by class size. The reading classes are generally smaller than the language arts classes where students in the class can number 30 or more students. Still the trend between the language arts grades and the grades for the other academic subject (math) is apparent. For example, the median scores show a one point difference between language arts and reading. Given the trend established for these seven students who have both learning and family issues to meet in their young lives, the data shows a positive relationship between students' grades in a democratic classroom environment in relation to students' grades from teachers who teach in a more traditional manner.

Now we can examine students' test scores in standardized achievement tests to see if we can determine a relationship between student's percentile scores and learning in a democratic classroom environment. Mr. B. Marsh is a sixth grade teacher of Language Arts and Math. Mr. Marsh also uses classroom meetings in all his classes. At the direction of the researcher, Mr. Marsh chose 18 students whom he would classify as discouraged learners from the math classes that he taught last year. We were able to retrieve the ITBS math test scores from 12 of the 18 discouraged students that Mr. Marsh chose for both the 2000-2001 school year (when the students were in elementary school) and the 2001-2002 school year (when he was their math teacher). Six of the 12 students

showed percentile gains in their math test scores from the previous year. The chart below presents the percentile gains or losses of those twelve students.



	PJ	HB	AO	WP	AR	MT	EK	AB	JB	LH	KH	HN
5th Grade	64	56	47	3	91	34	39	34	67	7	66	26
6th Grade	49	49	29	2	87	11	46	42	75	13	78	38

As many of these students reached their middle school years, they have become anxious about tests in general and achievement test scores in particular. Therefore, it is not a surprise that the percentile scores for half of these students did not improve. In a conversation I had about this data with my colleague who teaches special education courses, Dr. Ellyn Arwood (2003), noted that often these students become so discouraged by their lack of success that their percentile scores can actually regress. The students may eventually become so discouraged that they feel helpless to do anything to help themselves (Seligman, 1991). This may explain the regression of the six students in this small sample. Also, Ms. Sisco noted that her learning support students generally find the ITBS test "a scary big monster anyway" (Personal communication, 2003).

However, there is a more disturbing set of data not included in the above chart. Six of the students Mr. Marsh selected for the data set were students whose ITBS scores

we were unavailable because they were not enrolled in school at the time of the test. Therefore, from the original 18 discouraged learners Mr. Marsh had selected for us to review, only 12 remained in school to take the test and of that number only 6 students' percentile scores increased.

Mr. Marsh does note success for his students who find something "they can latch on to; they feel a little more invested in school. They want to be here so they try a little harder. They can see their success." (personal communication, 2003).

Ms. Sisco finds a lot of success for her students since she began using classroom meetings.

> Since we started using classroom meetings this year, our grades have definitely improved. We now have only two students failing and everyone else is passing. Last year a lot more students were failing. We have seen huge growth. Our behavior problems have been reduced. We don't have as much discipline problems. Everything is taken care of as the class meeting. (Personal communication, 2003).

Discussion:

These results indicate that teachers can have a more positive influence on student achievement when they allow students to have a voice in classroom decisions. However, the results are equivocal. The question has not been resolved and more study is warranted before we can reach any conclusions. This befits an exploratory study.

Leaving the social and political questions aside, we believe that it is critical for the research community to establish a link between democratic classroom practices and student achievement if we wish to increase student retention and decrease the drop out

rate. We need only heed the words of William Glasser (1990), "By the end of seventh grade, more than half the students believe that teachers and principals are their adversaries" (p.29).

The environment in one class is not sufficient to maintain a positive learning environment to support five of the six sixth grade students in the study and the other six students who did not take the test for whatever reason. One democratic classroom was not the answer for these six students nor will democratic classrooms be the answer for all students. In referring to this concern Mr. Marsh replied,

> One size does not fit all students. When you have a kid that has gone through six years of school and may have started to feel defeated in second or third grade, I don't know if an hour and a half (a day) with one teacher doing things differently is going to make that much of a difference (personal communication, 2003).

However, the results from this small data set show a promising practice that is certainly worthy of further study in the age of No Child Left Behind.

In the words of Mr. Marsh, when he considers the other teachers in his school who teach in a more traditional manner,

> It is pretty frustrating because I know we have a lot of kids just going through the system feeling defeated the whole way through. The kids that these teachers talk about when they are in the sixth grade are the same kids the 8th grade teachers are talking about this year. There isn't much change. (Personal conversation, 2003)

Indeed our findings do correspond with those of Ryan and Patrick (2001). When students feel that they have a voice in the classroom environment, they will not only be able to become contributing members in a democratic society, they will also be able "to

engage in more adaptive patterns of learning than would have been predicted from their reports the previous year" (p. 456). As Mr. Marsh said, "Kids knowing that they have a role in this whole process is a pretty powerful thing. Whether or not it shows up on their grade sheets this year, I think it's going to carry through in their lives" (personal communication, 2003).

If educational research can show a connection between democratic classroom practice and student performance, teachers may be more likely to risk greater student decision-making in their classrooms especially when those revisions are more likely to garner for the teachers and the students a greater sense of self-efficacy and an improved social climate in the classroom that in turn supports greater student learning.

Finally, it is worth noting that all three teachers were unanimous about the improvement they have personally found in their relationships with their students after they began using democratic classroom practices. Each of the three teachers told this researcher that they plan to continue using classroom meetings. In the words of Mr. Marsh, "When I teach this way (using democratic classroom practices), it is a lot more enjoyable and it is more enjoyable for students as well" (Personal communication, April, 2003)

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